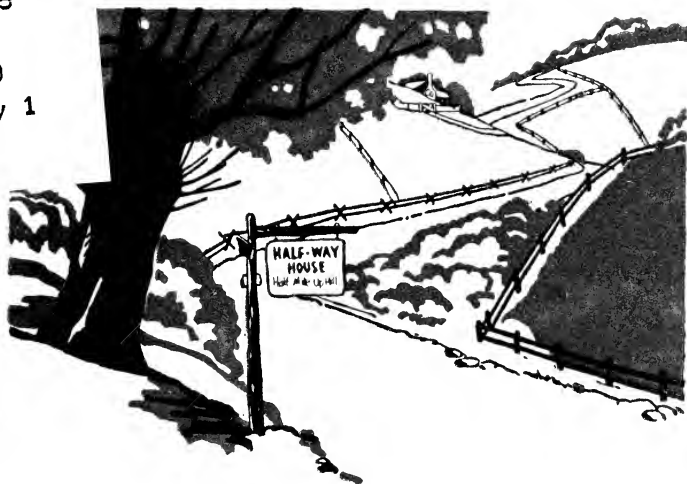


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HALF-WAY

J. A. X. S M I T H

HALF-WAY

BY
J. A. X. SMITH



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DEDICATION

*To the young man or young woman
that has the patience to work and wait
and stick this little volume is dedicated.*

---Author.

“HALF-WAY”

By J. A. X. SMITH

Jim Kenderdine, hobo.

Born in a small manufacturing town in Connecticut, he had received a Grammar School education and graduated at the age of sixteen, and with the optimism of youth had fancied he was prepared to step to the highest rung of the ladder of success by the simple snap of his fingers. He had stopped school and had idled away all of the following Winter, and Spring had arrived, yet he had no set plan as to his future. His father owned a small but complete factory, and employed a dozen or more workmen. At

his fathers earnest solicitation he had consented to enter the factory to learn the business from the bottom up. He was a great reader and soon began to read of other factories in their line and what they were doing in the larger towns around him. The spirit of discontent worried him. He could not see what there was to be gained by sticking around his fathers dinkey little factory. The big town was the place. There were the opportunities, there was the place for a young fellow, and he became sullen and morose in brooding over his position. The storm broke one morning when his father rebuked him for some neglected work, and in a fit of passion he had thrown down his tools and walked out of the factory and the town. He had made

up his mind to see the world and do as he pleased. Some day he would come back and buy the whole dinkey town.

And this was the beginning.

* * * * *

Years have passed, and now we find Jim Kenderdine seated in his easy chair, before a huge fireplace, with a group of young folks gathered around him, eagerly listening to the story he tells them. And they gather closer as they listen to his words:

THE STORY

I am a mechanic.

My father was a mechanic before me.

And my father's father before him.

I started to work early in life.

First in my father's shop.

Then becoming dissatisfied had taken a position in another factory.

I thought I had latent man's ability.

I thought I knew it all.

My father's advice fell on unheeding ears.

I had now worked in a dozen different factories.

Each one thrown up for another job with more alluring prospects.

To be sure, I had learned something in each new job.

Yet I was not content.

*The field across the way always
looked to my distorted vision the
greenest.*

And so I drifted on.

From one place to another.

I was discontented with my lot.

I could *never* seem to get farther
than “half-way.”

I had seen others attain positions of
trust.

I had seen them slowly mount the
ladder of Success.

There was a boyhood chum of mine
that came to my mind, as I thought
backwards.

We had started together in the same
shop.

He was still there.

The superintendent of the whole
works.

What was the matter with me?

I could only get "half-way."

I was a good mechanic.

I knew that.

But just when I thought I was going up, and looking forward to advancement, something would happen again, and I would walk out of the shop and hunt another job.

What was the matter with me?

The test for success is the patience to work and wait.

Here I had been working at my trade for fifteen years and was just a good lathe hand.

I was growing close to the dividing line between a young and an old hand.

Soon my energies would begin to flag.

Then a young man in my place.

Where would I be then?

I must wake up.

Thus I reasoned, as I lay on the grass by the side of the road, with my head on my pile of blankets.

At the bend of the long, long road, I lay in the warm sunshine.

Behind me, winding away into a hazy blue valley, the dusty road dwindled into nothingness.

Ahead of me the road climbed away to the crest of the hill.

Across the way, a swinging sign creaked in the midsummer breeze.

And it was this creaking, that disturbed me.

That rasping, insistent sound kept away the slumber that I had invited, while the stupor of the Summer day held me where I lay.

I read these words on the swaying sign, time and again, through half closed eyes.

<p>HALF-WAY HOUSE</p> <p>HALF MILE UP HILL</p>
--

“Half-way, half-way, half-way,” that creaking sign seemed to say, “Half-way, half-way, half-way.”

Beneath my head, my worldly possessions were wrapped loosely in a faded cotton blanket.

I smiled as this thought came to me.
Worldly Possessions.

What more could man possess than I had here by the side of the road?

Health, happiness and a bag of clothes?

“Half-way, half-way, half-way,”
creaked that creaking sign.

I lay upon my side, an ear buried in the blanket beneath me, I threw my arm over the other ear, to shut out that sound, but the very ears of my soul seemed to hear that sound, and the creaking—

“Half-way, half-way, half-way.”

And so I sat up provoked.

Would that creaking never cease?

I stared at the sign balefully.

This thing was becoming a curse.

Its cry was as insistent as the prodings of a guilty conscience.

I thought of the great world of youth and pleasure stretched out before me.

And my thoughts wandered back, down the long winding road.

I dozed in the warm sunshine, given over to day dreams.

In the far distance, I saw a bent figure climbing up the way I had come.

It was a man, long of beard, tottering as he walked, leaning heavily on the long staff in his hand.



His hat was drawn low over his face.

The beard and hat left but a narrow strip of face to be seen.

Yet there was something—

Something familiar, something strangely, dreadfully familiar about that hobbling figure in the road below.

I felt a chill creep into my soul.

“Half-way, half-way, half-way,” the sign creaked on.

I arose from my place on the grass.

I wrenched my gaze from the valley road, turned my back on it and looked up the mountain side, but something—something drew my gaze back to that hobbling thing.

Then I began to understand.

There was something about that hobbling figure that reminded me of myself.

And then I knew.

The realization startled me—

I must hurry on—on—on up the hill, or else that hobbling thing would overtake me, and then—

But this would never do.

I stooped and picking a stone from the side of the road, flung it at the croaking, creaking sign, and hurried on my way.

But a new weariness had stolen over me.

My load grew heavy.

And as the breeze came fresh from the valley it brought to my ears again:

“Half-way, half-way, half-way.”

* * * * *

I plodded up the hill.

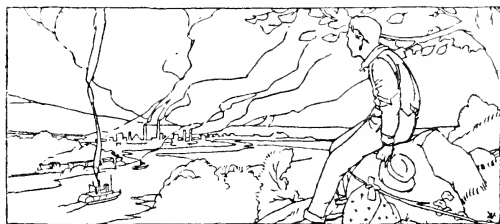
Past that creaking sign.

Past the “Half-Way House.”

Down into the valley that lay on the other side.

As I had topped the hill, the valley lay spread out before me like a picture in a book.

There was the winding river in the distance, with innumerable boats gliding over its waters.



There the steel rails of the railroads glittered in the sunshine.

From the stack of the great works on the river bank poured forth great clouds of heavy smoke, and rolled lazily away in the distance.

There was a busy look to the place.

I seemed to hear the hum of machinery, then—

"Half-way, half-way, half-way."

Would the echo of that creaking sign *never* leave me?

I hastened on down the hill.

The next morning I applied for work and was gladly taken on.

I had made a new resolution.

That creaking sign still seemed to pursue me with its insistent shriek

"Half-way, half-way, half-way."

* * * * *

Thus I tacked a new job.

I worked hard and diligently.

I was trying to change those words to: "Stick-there, stick-there."

As days passed, I saw the notice the Superintendent took of my work.

I was taking a strange pride in it.

“How do you do it?” asked the Superintendent of me one day.

“Stick-there, stick-there,” I said, and went on with my work.

He gave me a startled look, shook his head and passed on.

Each day I forced myself to forget that creaking sign and its “half-way, half-way.”

I was rapidly learning to use these words: “Stick-there, stick-there.”

And so I worked through the days of Fall and Winter into Spring.

A long time for me in one place.

* * * * * * *

Again I heard the call of Spring.

And again the memory of that sign board in vivid fancy obscured my vision.

<p>HALF-WAY HOUSE HALF MILE UP HILL</p>

* * * * *

The call of Spring was on.

The willows along the river were showing green.

The frogs on the banks were attuning themselves to their springtime music.

In the next yard, a small boy was digging fishing bait.

Here and there, in the sheltered corners, the golden dandelion was blossoming.

The wind from the West brought the smell of new plown earth.

The cattle could be seen, far up the hillside contentedly grazing.

The fever seized me.

I must move on.

* * * * *

That night I sat and pondered.

I passed through it all again.

In my mind I saw my grey-haired father, passing among the men in the old factory.

I heard his kindly words of good advice.

“A rolling stone gathers no moss.”

I saw my self-will in clashes with my father’s instructions.

Then the day I left the shop in anger.

I could have gone back there again.

But self-pride kept me from this step.

The lure of fancied greener fields was on me.

And I had wandered.

First to one place, then to another.

Thus I thought, as I sat by my window, long into the still night.

If I could only break the lure this time.

I felt sure that I could.

* * * * *

I started slowly for the works in the morning.

My footsteps lagged along the pathway to the factory.

My thoughts were in those other pastures.

I entered the workroom aimlessly.

The machinery had started.

I caught the whir of the wheels.

'Twas then I heard another sound.

It was a joyous sound.

I could not make it out.

It puzzled me and disturbed me.
It seemed to set my blood to tingling.

And then—

My brain cleared.

I began to whistle softly to myself.

*Happy and contented is the man
who can work and whistle.*

And this is what the sound seemed to be, as it stole slowly over my wondering senses:

“Got-there. Got-there.”

I could fancy the words in letters of fire on the factory wall.

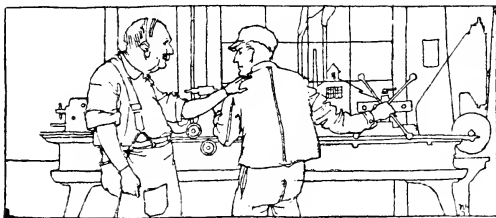
I donned my apron quickly, still whistling softly to myself.

The lathe seemed to be smiling to me.

The work went smooth and quickly.

The Superintendent passed my bench.

Then stopped and looked at me in astonishment.



A cheerful grin spread over his face.
A twinkle was in his sharp blue eyes.

Slapping me on the back, he said:
"Happy, Jim?"

I never looked up from my work,
stopped whistling, and answered:

"Got-there, got-there."

* * * * *

Thus I labored on for another year.
It had been a wonderful year for me.

I had worked steadily, and whistled constantly.

Being glad to work and glad to do my best brought to me many joys the idle never knew.

I had stepped up two rungs on the ladder.

Now, was a foreman in charge of a number of machines.

And better prospects in sight.

* * * * * * *

Came Summer and a slack time in the factory.

One day I was called into the office and offered the Superintendents position.

The Superintendent had been given a higher position in one of their factories in a distant city.

The offer was accepted.

With the offer came a two weeks vacation.

What would I do?

Where would I go?

Then again in my mind I heard that creaking sign.

It seemed to have changed its words, and was saying something else.

I could not make it out.

Strive as I would, it was impossible.

The more I thought, the more I wished to know.

Then I determined I would go back over that long road.

I would see that sign, if it was still there.

See if it still swung to the gentle breezes.

Maybe I would there find the answer to the riddle of the new words.

* * * * *

Next morning, bright and early, found me on the road.

I heard the gladsome whistle of a lark way up in the clouds.

I, also, whistled as I trudged along the dusty road.

I had never been back over that old road.

Would the old sign still swing from its rusty hinges?

I wondered if the “Half-Way House” was still there.

And I plodded on.

In the dusk of evening I approached the crest of the hill.

I had taken my time in climbing.

As I topped the hill the “Half-Way House” loomed weirdly in the falling dusk.

As I stood there looking, a light sprang out from a window.

Then several more followed.

The old house seemed to be just awaking from sleep.

I trudged on, down past the open gateway.

On past the house, to the turn in the road where the sign post had stood two years ago.

A gentle breeze was coming up the hillside.

And as I hastened on I listened.

Listened, for that creaking sign.

At first my ears could not make out a sound.

I thought it must be gone.

That old rusty sign.

Then to my ears there came a faint, far away *c-r-e-a-k, c-r-e-a-k*.

The sound floated by me and all was still.

I hastened forward to the old post, which I could just make out in the gloaming.

I reached it and stopped.

Yes, there was the sign, but silent in the early evening.

I stood and gazed at it.

That old, battered, rusty sign.

Would it tell me the words I sought?

Then a puff of air swung it out.

I jumped as if some one had struck me from behind.

Then, clearly, as a clarion note, came the sound of the old sign, and these were the words burned on my memory:

“You’re there! You’re there!”

* * * * *

And now I stood and meditated on the past.

It is a long, long trail that has no turn.

'Twas good to think now, and I began to whistle.

So I sat through the warm Summer night.

I was waiting the coming of the morning.

At times I fancied I heard a shuffling footstep on the road below me.

But I could not see beyond the sign.

What was it?

Then I remembered the tottering thing I had seen two years ago in my day dream.

Anxiously I awaited the coming of the sun.

Would I see this old man again?

Bent, bedraggled and worn?

Somehow I did not fear him now.

I would welcome him now if he came up.

And then the sound of footsteps broke on my listening ears.

Then the traveler appeared around the bend.

I started in astonishment.

It was a woman—

PART II.

Patience Grey, only daughter of Isaac and Mary Grey.

Isaac Grey was a well to do farmer who lived on his little farm some forty miles from the largest city in the state.

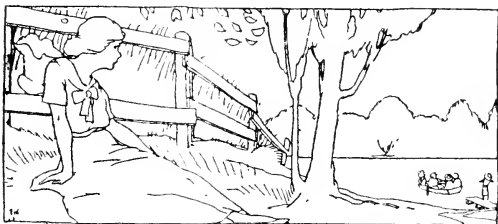
It was a community in which the Society of Friends largely predominated. Isaac and his good wife, Aunt Mary, as she was called by the young people of the community, had been brought up and belonged to the Society of Friends all their lifetime.

Plain of dress and plain of speech.

They both looked askance at the show of dress and the frivolities of the young.

So instilled was this in their natures that Aunt Mary had quietly removed a black buckle from the hat of Isaac, with the remark to him “It might make thee vain, Isaac.”

And Patience had grown up in this atmosphere.



The next farm, down by the river had taken Summer boarders for two Summers now.

Patience had seen the gay young folks from the city, gaily bedecked

in Summer finery, having picnics and dances in the grove on the river bank.

And she longed to be one of them.

One First Day morning she had broken the tenets of her father and mother and had attended one of their Sunday picnics.

On her return home she had been severely reprimanded by her father.

That night she had slipped away and gone to the city.

She would see something besides the old farm and its never ceasing monotony of drudgery and sameness.

She secured a position in a large and fashionable restaurant.

Her sweet face and innocent manner soon won for her a host of friends among the wealthy patrons of the place.

She soon began to have invitations to little dances and parties.

She accepted them all.

She was having a good time.

One day at the urgent appeal of one of the wealthy patrons she had accepted an invitation for a ride and a dinner in the afternoon, after her duties were over for the day.

And he had taken her to the “Half-Way House” to dinner.

They had entered the dining room, crowded with people.

Everybody gay and having a good time.

Here she had taken her first wrong step.

Around her there were other tables with people seated and drinking.

It was a new experience to her.

She looked on and wondered.

Some were dancing to the strains of soft music.

Others sat at tables partaking of various colored beverages.

There was a young woman giving an interpretation of an ancient dance.

A young woman dressed in flimsy drapery.

How Patience' face burned as she sat and listened to the praises of the idle society men and women who looked approvingly on.

Turning her back to the spectacle she shuddered.

Glancing up she saw a large Newfoundland dog standing just in the doorway with his eyes fastened on her.

The dog seemed to know her.

He lifted his ears and waved his tail slowly.

Memories of her home floated across her mind.

Perhaps it was the wine.

Perhaps it was the pricking of her conscience.

She remembered old “Bingo” down on the farm.

She silently motioned to the dog, and he came slowly across the room.

He came up to her side and laid his great head in her lap and looked up with questioning friendly eyes.

Patience reaches down and takes the dog’s head between her hands and looks into his great brown eyes.

What does she see?

She looks again and starts and trembles as she looks.

As in a mystic glass she seems to see.

There, mirrored as in a picture, in the dog's eyes she sees the old home.

There is the great sitting room.

A fire is burning in the large fireplace.

Old "Bingo" lies stretched contentedly before the fire.

Her mother sits idly in her rocking chair.

She has been knitting.

She could see the little heart shaped badge pinned to her waist with its quill sticking out, but no needle in it.

The knitting has now fallen to her lap.

Her hands are clasped before her.

She appears to be in deep meditation.

She could see the waves of her hair at the side of her plain white cap.

How grey it looked.

What could she be thinking about?

She would give the world to know.

Slowly she sees her mother rise and approach the window and gaze down the lane towards the entrance gate.

Then she turns and approaches the mantle, takes something from a little basket, her sewing basket, and again turns to the window.

What can it be?

Strain as her eyes would she could not make it out.

Then her mother lays the object reverently on the window sill, while she slowly draws the curtain.

And then she recognizes it.

It is one of *her* little old white baby shoes.

No need to wonder what her mother is thinking of now.

And then the pangs of sorrow cut deep and cause her to almost scream in her nervous frenzy.

Great scalding tears well up and slip unheeded down her cheeks, dropping on the shaggy head of the dog.

The dog whimpers in sympathy and wags his tail with seeming understanding.

She looked quickly around the room.

Her companion is taken up with watching the dancer.

He appears to have forgotten her.

Then she looks into the dog's eyes again.

And now she sees her father.

He is setting on the opposite side of the fireplace.

He has a paper in his hand and she can not see his face.

She tries to see the paper he is reading.

And then she sees that it is upside down.

He *also* must be thinking.

He looks up when mother leaves the mantle.

Old “Bingo” moves uneasily.

Father lays down his paper and raises from his chair, lays his hand gently on mother’s shoulder and they both look into the fire for a moment, then with his arm around her waist they both go to the window and raise the curtain and gaze out.

They stand there for a moment, then both leave the room together.

Old “Bingo” gets up and stretches, then follows them.

She remembers how in her childhood days, when her father had punished

her for some insubordination, she had fled thru the kitchen door down into the orchard and flung herself face down under the apple trees and sobbed as if her heart would break; how old "Bingo" had followed her and placing one paw on her shoulder had whined his sympathy; how she had flung her arms around his neck and sobbed out that "*Nobody loved her but the dog.*"

The realization of all this was driving her frantic, she must leave this place.

She rises hurriedly from the table, upsetting the wine over the floor, and rushes madly from the room.

Through the great doors, down the driveway into the road.

Past the old sign swinging in the breeze.

As she passes the sign the words are burned into her memory.

"Half Way. Half Way."

Again she shudders and hurries on down the road.

Just beyond the bend she is overtaken by a farmer boy on his way to the city.

He gladly takes her in.

She returns to the city and never returns to the restaurant.

She secured another position and was now the private secretary of the President of a large corporation.

Honest labor must succeed, with the patience to work and wait.

She had worked and waited.

This was her vacation week.

Longing for home and a curiosity to know if the old sign and the dog were

still on the hill, had brought her out early this June morning and we now find her telling her story to Jim Kenderdine under the shade of the old oak tree by the side of the "Half Way House" sign.

* * * * *

As she sits there in the shade of the trees she sees the dog in the distance.



She asks Jim to call the dog.
The dog comes running gaily.
He makes friends with Jim also.

The ice is broken and to an inquiry as to what brought her out so early and alone; she told her story to him.

For a time they both sit in silence.

Then both arise and go slowly down the hill together.

PART III.

Years have passed.

Their home is on top of the hill.

Just below them, on one side, the city
has spread to both banks of the river.

A city of a hundred thousand souls.

On the other side of the hill they can
see the ruins of the "Half-Way House."

Now fallen into decay.

The old stone chimney stands grey
and forboding.

The empty windows look out on the
dusty highway.

The great oaken door has fallen in.

The drive and yard is overgrown
with weeds and hollyhocks.

Here and there a tall sunflower nods
its seed-filled head in the sultry air.

The gates have been taken away and
the old posts sag drunkenly forward.

The sign is gone from the post at
the bend of the road.

They had rescued that old sign when
the post that supported it had rotted
away.

It now hangs in the place of honor.
Just above the fireplace.

That old, battered, rusty sign.

Its letters almost obliterated.

No more will its dismal creak dis-
turb their fancies.

* * * * *

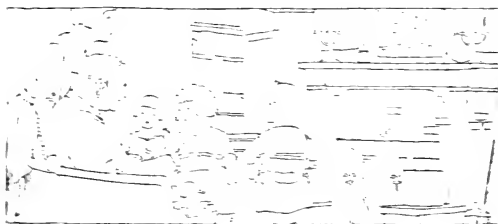
And now they sit by the fireside.

Years have sprinkled their hair
with grey.

The music of little childrens laughter is in their ears.

They come flocking around them.

Calling again, and again for the story of the old sign.



And Jim tells the story to the children.

The story of that "Half-Way" sign.
It will often bear retelling.

To their children and their children's children.

It still has a story to tell to all mankind.

And always will.

If they will but listen to it—

AND STICK.

THE END
FOR ONE IS THE BEGINNING FOR
OTHERS





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